

The Role of Religion in Building Peace

Your eminence (s), excellencies, members of the Franciscan family, and all other guests of this conference. I

In various parts of the world the human family is experiencing a crisis in self-understanding. Various communities are asking age-old questions of identity: Who am I?, Who are my neighbors?, To whom am I accountable? Should I engage others who are different than I am and to what extent, if at all, should I embrace their otherness? Is peaceful co-existence with those who belong to a different political, cultural, or religious tradition than our own possible or are we resigned to endless conflict? These are some of the central questions that we must adequately address if we are to promote the common good.

Fears related to particular persons and communities and our failure to embrace authentic human differences often drive us apart. These fears have precipitated rejection and persecution of others. New threats to peace have emerged from war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, religious conflicts, poverty, human migrations, and climate changes. Paradoxically, an age widely characterized by interdependence and a growing sense of diversity, an age when distant communities can relate via cyberspace at the simple touch of a mouse pad, is also an age marked by growing fear and conflict with others.

Religious voices, and in particular religious communities, have a central role to play in helping civic leaders address these challenges and effect reconciliation among peoples. Back in 2005, in a keynote speech I offered to the Franciscan Federation in the United States, I argued that at a time characterized by militarism, conquest, moral corruption, religious tensions and abuse of power, Francis and Clare reject violence and exclusion and opted instead for conversation with and reception of others. I argued then and repeat now that the story of Francis's conversation with the sultan and encounter with Islam offers a roadmap for encountering and learning from the goodness of others and their distinct otherness. Similarly, I have also pointed out that the Benedictine values of community and hospitality to the stranger have much to contribute to the world in which we live. There is a hidden treasure yet to be discovered in Jewish, Christian, Muslim and other religious traditions that can help us address the signs of our time.

Speaking to the Clinton Global Initiative on September 22, 2009 about Afghanistan and Pakistan, President Obama argued that "we need to build new partnerships across regions and religions--and that requires requires religious leaders, and NGOs, citizens to help build the good governance, and transparent institutions and basic services upon which true security depends." In his acceptance speech to the Nobel Peace Prize, the president acknowledged the hard truth of violent conflict in our lifetimes and the need at times to use force in protection of human lives.

But he underscored that he made this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. had said in the same ceremony years ago that "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones." The President argued that he was "living testimony to the moral force of non-violence" and that he knew that there was "nothing weak—nothing passive—nothing naïve—in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King."

In October, Pope Benedict XVI will host a summit of world leaders in Assisi to discuss how they can better promote peace. This will be an opportunity for religious leaders from traditions to gather and reflect upon how they can help foster greater understanding within the human family and thereby promote the cause of peace. In recent times the work of religious leaders in achieving conflict resolution and promoting peace has been indispensable. Take, for instance, the work of Caritas in Rwanda and in the north of Congo. Caritas has been very successful in promoting interethnic relations. Similarly, thanks to the Community of Sant'Egidio a number of national conflicts have been resolved. Last year, Sant'Egidio led an outstanding agreement to guarantee a peaceful and democratic transition in Guinea Conakry.

These are just a few examples that witness how religious leaders have helped communities overcome conflict, welcome authentic human differences, increase mutual understanding, and build peace. They witness to the fact that governments around the world have much to gain by partnering with religious leaders. Of course, throughout history we have also witnessed the dark side of religion. Not everything that passes as religion and not everyone who claims to be religious builds up the common good. There is history of misrepresenting religion by individuals who have abused and acted against others in the name of God. This history, however, should not become the test case for understanding and debating the role of religious leaders in the world. There are plenty of examples in the past and present that witness the role of religious leaders in building up the common good. The contribution of Martin Luther King Jr. to the civil rights movement in the U.S. comes to mind.

Today, in this age of interdependence, the work of turning interfaith and meaningful worldly conversations into constructive actions cannot be done by any government or religious entity alone. Speaking as the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, I want to conclude by saying that much has been accomplished in the last 27 years of formal diplomatic partnership. Still, much more can and should be done to advance the cause of peace by bridging the varied and diverse resources of the United States of America with the vast network of peace-building efforts associated with the Catholic Church.

Thank you,

Ambassador Diaz

